

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared

**Additional View of Senator Lautenberg Regarding the Need to Account
for People with Pets in Emergency Planning**

One of the many disturbing and heart-rending developments we saw unfold after Hurricane Katrina was the peril many people found themselves in because they could not bear to evacuate without their pets, and the anguish of those people who were forced to leave their pets behind.

There was much media coverage, both in print and on television, of distraught pet owners and of abandoned animals going hungry, thirsty, and full of fear as their world was washed away. Millions of people heard or saw the distressing story of one young boy who was so traumatized after his dog was taken from him when he boarded a bus to leave the Superdome that he became physically ill. One distraught woman reportedly offered her wedding ring to a shelter aide if he would find out what had happened to her dog, which she was not allowed to bring inside with her.

The evidence suggests that the attachment people have to their pets was a key reason why many decided not to evacuate. According to a recent survey of people affected by Hurricane Katrina who were living in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama, 44 percent of those who did not evacuate by choice (as opposed to those who lacked the means to do so), did not leave in part because they weren't willing to abandon their pets.¹

These were life and death decisions, and for some of these people, the decision to stay with their pets cost them their lives. The Mississippi *Sun Herald* recently identified seven individuals who died during or after Hurricane Katrina because they did not want to leave a beloved pet, and so they stayed in harm's way.²

Moreover, some of the animals left behind, agitated by hunger, thirst and fear, presented threats to the rescue and response personnel who went door-to-door looking for survivors.

As with other aspects of the disjointed and incomplete preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, there was no plan in place to help people with pets evacuate, or to ensure there were adequate shelters that could accommodate people and their pets.

¹ Fritz Institute, "Hurricane Katrina: Perceptions of the Affected," April 26, 2006.

² Karen Nelson, "Staying with animals in Katrina was a deadly choice for some, and the hurricane left other owners seeking shelter from the storm," SunHerald.com, posted April 30, 2006 (<http://www.sunherald.com/mld/sunherald/news/local/14464093.htm>).

I agree with the Committee Report's finding that the needs of those with pets and service animals should be a factor in emergency planning for evacuations and sheltering. While I support the Committee's recommendation that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should encourage individuals as well as state and local governments to plan for evacuating and sheltering pets, I also think it is important that we do more to address this issue. To that end, I joined Senator Stevens in introducing the "Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act," S. 2548.

Our bill would require state and local emergency preparedness plans to take into account the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals. In addition, our bill would authorize the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide technical assistance in developing these plans and financial assistance for purchasing, constructing, leasing, or renovating emergency shelter facilities that can accommodate people with pets and service animals. Finally, our bill would include people with pets and service animals among those for whom FEMA may provide essential assistance in response to a major disaster.

I hope that our bill will be included as part of any legislation that this Committee develops in response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

In addition, I am concerned by reports that despite FEMA's deployment of more than 200 veterinarians to assist in the Gulf Coast – the largest simultaneous deployment of veterinary relief in U.S. history – the veterinary teams were ill-equipped because of FEMA policies. Apparently, FEMA prohibits veterinarians from using their own equipment, accepting donations, or buying supplies. As a result, Veterinary Medical Assistance Teams (VMATs) – which are identified in the National Response Plan as the source of federal veterinary medical treatment during an emergency – did not have what they needed to carry out their mission.³

I believe the Committee should work with FEMA, DHS, and other interested parties to address problems like this to ensure that, like the rest of FEMA, VMATs will be appropriately staffed, equipped, and otherwise prepared to fulfill their role within the National Response Plan.

Conclusion

It is important to note that what happened in the Gulf Coast could happen anywhere in the United States the next time disaster strikes. According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Americans currently have over 358 million pets. Sixty-three percent of all American households have one or more pets. So wherever a natural or manmade disaster could occur, many of the people who would be affected will be pet owners – 61 percent of whom told national pollsters they would refuse to evacuate ahead of a disaster if they could not take their pets with them.⁴

³ William Wan, "A Lesson from Katrina: Pets Matter," *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2006.

⁴ <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1029>

One of the most important lessons to be learned from Hurricane Katrina is that planning and preparedness are essential to avoid aggravating whatever disasters may strike in the future. By accounting for the very strong ties that millions of Americans have to their pets in preparing for future emergencies, we can ensure a better response and actually save lives. As HSUS executive vice president Michael Markarian has said, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath “made people recognize that helping pets during a disaster is helping people during a disaster.”

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